

## **Making the New Medicare Prescription Drug Plan Work for You**

By Congressman Ron Kind

Wisconsin's seniors deserve a comprehensive and affordable health care system, including a simple and affordable prescription drug benefit. That benefit should also be reliable and administered in the most effective and efficient way possible in order to best serve the millions of seniors with prescription drug needs.

I recently held a series of public forums to address problems people have encountered with the new Medicare Part D drug benefit. Whether they experienced a long delay at the pharmacy, on the phone, or didn't get their drugs at all, the beneficiaries at the meetings expressed both frustration and concern.

More than two years have passed since the Medicare Part D law was enacted in 2003. During that time the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare (CMS) was tasked with planning and preparing for the new program, which began in January of 2006. I know this is a great undertaking, but as we have seen in the first month of implementation there are serious problems with the new program, the worst of which have prevented some of the neediest Medicare beneficiaries from getting their medications.

Many states, including the state of Wisconsin, have acted swiftly to enact emergency safety net programs to ensure that seniors do not go without their medicine. Meanwhile, pharmacists have gone beyond the call of duty to fill prescriptions, some paying for drugs out of their own pockets, to ensure their customers don't leave the pharmacy empty-handed.

Given the early stumbles of the program and having heard from many people who were not receiving their prescriptions, I called on the Administration in January to take immediate action. In early February, CMS responded by announcing a reimbursement plan for states paying for prescriptions and made assurances that it is focused on rectifying the problems with data transmission, pharmacy support, and other issues that have fumbled the transition for dual eligibles and confused the process for general enrollees.

Time is of the essence in addressing these problems because the law has dictated a rigid timeline for enrollment, with penalties for those who don't pick a plan by May 15, 2006. Due to efforts by Wisconsin's Congressional delegation and Governor Jim Doyle, there is some flexibility for seniors covered under the state-run SeniorCare program who may continue to use this plan through June 30, 2007, without penalization. I am also supporting legislation to extend the enrollment period for Part D through December, 31 2006, to allow more time for beneficiaries to sort through the menu of options in order to decide which plan, if any, is best for them.

While I did not vote for the Medicare drug benefit, believing it was flawed on many levels, it is critical that it be implemented correctly and that seniors have the resources they need to choose the best drug option for them. Although I remain concerned about

the program and believe it is in need of many changes, I am committed to helping seniors access the most helpful information and resources available.

Organizations that can provide direct help for seniors include:

- Medicare Help Line: 1-800-MEDICARE or [www.medicare.gov](http://www.medicare.gov) 24 hours a day, 7 days a week;
- Social Security Administration: 1-800-772-1213 or [www.ssa.gov/prescriptionhelp](http://www.ssa.gov/prescriptionhelp);
- SeniorCare hotline: 1-800-657-2038;
- Coalition of Wisconsin Aging Groups, Elder Law Center: 1-866-456-8211 or [www.wismedrx.org](http://www.wismedrx.org).

Additional resources, including county contacts, are available on my Web site [www.house.gov/kind](http://www.house.gov/kind) or on request by calling my toll-free number at (888) 442-8040.

*Congressman Kind is a Democrat representing Wisconsin's Third Congressional District.*